# Title: Ruling Relations and the School Librarian
# Subtitle: An Institutional Ethnography

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*The work of a school librarian is shaped by relations seen and unseen. Problematizing the effects of these relations on the institutions of education, librarianship, and school librarianship can lead to a greater understanding of the work of the librarian. I will use institutional ethnography methods to investigate relations of education, librarianship, and school librarianship Institutional ethnography has been used to investigate the coordination of activities in other human services, but institutional ethnography has not yet been applied intensively in educational settings (Smith, 2005). Institutional ethnography can be used as a method of inquiry into the work of people in educational settings.*

*Institutional ethnography, Ruling relations, sociology*

## Introduction

The work of a school librarian is shaped by relations seen and unseen. The work is governed in part by the relationship the school librarian has with administrators and teachers within the school, but these relationships are also coordinated by unseen and unobservable forces. These forces might be taken for granted, but problematizing the effects of these forces on the institutions of education, librarianship, and school librarianship can lead to a greater understanding of the work of the librarian.

I will use institutional ethnography methods as described by Dorothy Smith, including interviews, focus groups, textual analysis, and participant observation, to investigate relations of education, librarianship, and school librarianship (Smith, 2005). I am particularly interested in the librarian's place at an intersection of institutions with varying rules. Institutional ethnography methods use the actual experiences of people to examine unseen or unobservable relations governing institutions. These unseen relations might have a great effect on the perceived importance and effectiveness of the school library. That perceived importance and effectiveness is one element governing the librarian's access to students, classroom time, and funding. The librarian is a key defender and representative of the library. School libraries are often vulnerable to budget cuts because the librarian's perceived effectiveness is sometimes used to assess the value the library itself brings to the school (Hartzell, 1997; Johnson, 2003). From the beginning, school libraries in the United States have been vulnerable to budget cuts and closures (Department of the Interior, 1876). Despite their work and training in literacy and education, school librarians are largely absent from the

literacy discourse, with the exception of discourse by librarians for librarians. Decisions made at federal and state levels have continuing repercussions for librarians, such as a decision by federal officials in the 1950s to classify school librarians as support staff (AASL, 2006). Who makes those decisions and how do they affect the school librarian?

Institutional ethnography has been used to investigate the coordination of activities of nurses, mall surveillance camera operators, and people with AIDS, among other populations, but institutional ethnography has not yet been applied intensively in educational settings (Smith, 2005). The work of people in educational settings is coordinated by unseen relations, which can be discovered using institutional ethnography as a method of inquiry.

Institutional ethnographers are interested in the trans-local and extra-local and their influences on the embodied local life of people. A school librarian is an embodied human in a location: the library within a school, but the librarian's work is also affected by decisions made in other locations, including the city council, the school district, the state educational organization, the state legislature, and the federal government. In many countries, similar organizations coordinate the local embodied work of school librarians.

Institutional ethnography is not a theory, but a method of inquiry. It does not seek to explain the embodied experience, but to explicate it. "It is a method of inquiry into the social that proposes to enlarge the scope of what becomes visible from that site, mapping the relations that connect one local site to others"(Smith, 2005, p. 29). Individuals are the experts on their own lived experiences, but to understand the relations organizing everyday life, the institutional ethnographer needs to go beyond the everyday life of one individual. The institutional ethnographer might begin with the lived experiences of one person, but will need to expand the inquiry to other people or other sites. An institution is more than just a building. It is a collection of texts, expectations, social relations organizing the work of those involved in the organization. "These relations coordinate the work of people at one site or at multiple sites. Institutions are functional complexes within the ruling relations—schools, universities, hospitals, mass media, corporations, and so on. Their standardized, generalized modes of existence rely on the replicability of texts. They are both where you are in your body and they connect you with elsewheres and elsewhens. They connect you with the subjectivity and objectivity of others" (Smith, 2007).

Institutional ethnography does not begin with a theory per se. Rather, it begins with framing the problematic. The problematic is not "the problem." It is a way of examining daily work without taking any of it for granted. Rather than assuming things are the way they are because that is how it is, making the work problematic tries to examine how things came to be the way they are.

The work of the school librarian is most certainly organized elsewhere in ways that are often taken for granted. Schedules are coordinated in conjunction with curricular needs, which are determined at multiple levels by various individuals and institutions. Curriculum choices are governed by local, state, and country agencies and designed to meet the demands of employers, governments, and institutions of higher learning. Schedules are adjusted for high-stakes assessment testing. These factors are taken for granted, rather than analyzed for their influence on the work of the school librarian.

The work of the school librarian, if done well, is largely invisible to teachers and students. Some of the school librarian's work, such as evaluating books, is often seen as leisure activity by others. Articles dispensing advice for school librarians ignore the trans-

local and extra-local relations coordinating the school librarian's work and assume a level of self-governance that does not exist.

The title of the person who acts as a librarian in a school setting is used to convey meaning. The titles include librarian, school librarian, teacher-librarian, and school library media specialist in the US. For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to this person as a "librarian." In future presentations, I will use the preferred title of the participant(s) in the ethnography. The choice of titles is coordinated outside the school library as well. My preferred title of school librarian is coordinated in part by my education first as a librarian, second as a school librarian. School librarians who enter the profession after working in classrooms might prefer the term "teacher-librarian." The choice of titles might affect the way the librarian is viewed within the structure of the school.

Institutional ethnography developed as a method of inquiry from Dorothy Smith's understanding of problems with traditional sociology. "…[S]ociology has taken the perspective of the institutional process that organizes the world as it appears for those whose professional business it is"(Smith, 1987, p. 63). Traditional sociological methods examine problems in a way that takes for granted the dominant point of view. Many studies in school librarianship examine how well the library's program supports goals set at an extra-local site. While reaching for goals is essential, studies that begin by taking the existence of these goals for granted cannot explain how the librarian's actions are coordinated. If the goals are seen as self-evident, rather than created, their coordinating effects on the work of school librarians might not be seen. This research will show how one school district's library system is affected by these unseen rules and relations.

## Methods

This ethnographic inquiry will include several informal interviews with the teacher-librarian, at a location of the librarian's choice. In a pilot study, the school librarian chose to be interviewed at a table in her library. I will conduct informal interviews with people who work at the district and state level coordinating school library activities. I plan to have informal conversations with teachers and administrators regarding the school library, both as an institution and as an actual place in the school building. I will gather documents the librarian identifies as important to his or her job and analyze them as well, looking for signs of perceptions and decisions affecting the library. This study will include observation as well. As a librarian, I will be a participant observer in the school library, which will give me an opportunity to experience directly the effects of the rules. At the same time, the librarian and teachers will remain experts when it comes to their own situations, perceptions, and experiences.

The analysis of the interviews, observations, and texts will be fluid and on-going. The object of study is not the librarian or his or her behavior. Instead, the object of study is the librarian's place in the social relations of the school, the district, and the institutions, and how those social relations govern the librarian's work. "Rather than explaining behavior, we begin from where people are in the world, explaining the social relations of the society of which we are part, explaining an organization that is not fully present in one individual's everyday experience" (Smith, 1987, p. 89). As I analyze the data, I will share my perceptions with participants as a form of member checking and to be sure they have an important role in creating the ethnography. In my pilot study, I found a certain amount of resistance on my own part to sharing my observations with the participant. I felt vulnerable, as if I were

risking exposure by sharing my analysis. Using this methodology strips away the idea of the researcher as an expert. It places the researcher as a human being at the site interacting with other human beings.

The chosen district was selected on the basis of accessibility to me as a researcher. I am deliberately not choosing a site based on measurements of achievement in education or in librarianship. It might turn out that the district I have access to is a district with a library system that is considered successful. However, those measurements of achievement are not key to my ethnographic approach. Many other studies focus successfully on model libraries, but this study has a different purpose. I am not looking for explanations for why a library is successful. Rather, I am interested in a picture of the experiences of the school librarian.

Key questions that will guide the research at the beginning include: who makes decisions about the school library? Is the school library considered when administrators make decisions affecting the school community as a whole? How does the librarian participate with teacher colleagues in non-instructional tasks? Why did the librarian choose this career? How is the library presented to students? What happens when students are in the library? (For example, does the librarian stay in his or her office while the classroom teacher provides reader's advisory and reference help? Or are the students dropped off while the classroom teacher goes elsewhere?) What is the role of the librarian? Since this research is not just investigating social relations within the building, I will also look at the library's relationship with decision-makers in the local community, at the district level, and at state level. I will also look at the librarians' relationships with national education, literacy, and library associations. More questions will come up in the course of the research.

## Ethical Concerns

Through the course of the research, I will work to be sure the participants are not harmed by this study. Information about the participants will be confidential. Identifying information about the school will be removed or obscured. I will carefully consider the implications of quotations, understanding that despite my efforts to protect the participants, people at the site will be aware of the research and will have access to publications discussing the research. Institutional ethnography brings a special set of challenges when it comes to protecting the participants. The methodology is based firmly in the local, lived experiences of human beings. The experiences of the participants are the key information in the study. Therefore, the participants might be easily identified, even if I choose to present the work of the librarians themselves anonymously, pseudonymously, or collectively. The participants must know of this risk. The risk of exposure and my priority of protecting the participants might result in stifling or stymieing some inquiry or analysis. Although I know full protection of the identity of the participants is impossible with this methodology, I will make every attempt to protect them as fully as possible. Indeed, as I write the text, I will work from the assumption that my participants are identifiable, in order to avoid publishing information that would embarrass or injure them.

This research will also be shaped by the Institutional Review Board, a system put into place in U.S. universities to try to prevent malfeasance in research involving human subjects. In the past four years as a library student, then a doctoral student, I have had the opportunity to participate in several coordinating activities, including being involved in school library curriculum decisions and attending district-wide and state-wide meetings. I have worked with school librarians formally and informally and have close relationships with several of

my library school classmates who are now school librarians. While these experiences inform my research and my framing of a problematic, they are not considered acceptable for inclusion into published literature.

Lederman points out IRB procedures take for granted a certain way of conducting research. She argues the "Common Rule," the U.S. federal regulation upon which IRB procedures are based, "presupposes biomedicine's distinctive harms and benefits, typical research protocols, and background assumptions concerning the agents and objects of study," yet the regulations have been applied to research outside biomedical fields (Lederman, 2006). These regulations, in fact, shape research, not just in biomedical fields, but in social sciences. The rigid structure of the IRB process excludes research emerging from observation and analysis. The IRB structure also shapes and coordinates the researcher's relationship with the participants. For example, in order to submit an IRB proposal at my institution, one must submit a letter from the site saying the researcher has gained access to the site. Researchers must gain access to the gatekeepers of the site before gaining access to the site. However, after access has been granted, the researcher and potential participants must still wait to learn whether the proposal itself will be approved. A proposal that is denied could lead to inconvenience for gatekeepers and potential participants and embarrassment and loss of goodwill for the researcher.

## Conclusion

The focus is on beginning to understand how ruling relations affect school librarians. An understanding of these relations can help librarians and researchers understand ways to coordinate their work within their institutions and to play an active part in decisions governing their work. These concepts can help librarians look at their own institutions and their place in those institutions in order to understand the effect of unseen ruling relations on their work. In the future, I plan to expand the study to look at the effect of ruling relations on students using the library.

I will discuss my methodology and preliminary findings, along with plans for continuing the research. As this research will take place in a school district in the Midwestern United States, my discussion will have a distinctly U.S. character, but I hope it will also help school librarians outside the United States understand the conditions of their colleagues and perhaps discover more about their own ruling relations.

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## *Level 4 heading (Biographical Notes)*

Jennifer Crispin studies school libraries, with a special interest in literacy and library materials for youth. She earned her MLS from the University of Missouri in 2006. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in English from the University of Maryland University College, where she studied in classrooms in Korea, Germany, and Italy.

## Statement of Originality

This statement certifies that the paper above is based upon original research undertaken by the author and that the paper was conceived and written by the author(s) alone and has not been published elsewhere. All information and ideas from others is referenced.